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History 407

The 1960s NAACP Campaign to Integrate Public Housing in Portland

Like many other cities in the U.S. during the 1960s, Portland, Oregon featured an undeniable black ghetto, located in the heart of its Albina district. The Portland branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) struggled throughout the 1960s to keep local government from perpetuating the existing ghetto. For years, the NAACP and other civil rights organizations protested plans from the Housing Authority of Portland (HAP) to build federally subsidized public housing units in the heart of Albina. In order to understand how and why the NAACP and other organizations disputed the plans of the HAP during the first half of the 1960s, I begin by looking at the powerful, unified voice formed by the NAACP and assess what tools the organization used to bend public opinion in its favor. From there, I analyze the NAACP efforts to bring federal attention to local public housing issues and follow that with a brief look at how Portland's situation fit into the national context of public housing. I assess the factors that led to Portland's 1960s housing problems, and conclude with a section on the HAP's efforts to divide the NAACP civil rights coalition. I argue that the NAACP and other civil rights organizations in Portland allied themselves effectively in the 1960s and played a major role in keeping the HAP from reinforcing the city's black ghetto through the use of public housing.

A number of historians have explored the topic of public housing and race in other U.S. cities, but only one has focused specifically on Portland during this period. I contrast both the situation in Chicago and Philadelphia, two cities commonly studied by historians, with what transpired in Portland. Arnold Hirsch crafted the blueprint by examining post-World War II

public housing in Chicago. He coined the phrase “making the second ghetto” in order to describe the way Chicago’s ghetto was reinforced through government involvement in public housing initiatives. In his interpretation, civil rights leaders in Chicago found themselves divided and overlooked by city planners who sought to build up the black ghetto. Stuart McElderry took a similar approach in his study of public housing in Portland during the 1960s, as he argued that civil rights groups in Portland were split and wielded little power on the issue of public housing. While I see most of the elements of Hirsch’s concept of the “second ghetto” in Portland, I disagree with McElderry’s take on the unity and impact of local civil rights organizations.¹

Throughout its Portland campaign, the NAACP always managed to rally a united front of people who felt convinced that HAP policies promoted segregation. A watershed moment for the group came on June 24, 1963, at a public hearing that featured a groundswell of support for the NAACP cause. Initially unwilling to listen to public opinion, the HAP had been backed into capitulating by the Greater Portland Council of Churches (GPCC), a close counterpart of the NAACP. The GPCC had urged the authority to hold a public hearing to discuss a proposed 135-unit public housing project slated for Portland’s Albina district. Torn between the desperate need for public housing and the proposed location of the HAP development – right in the midst of a black ghetto – virtually all of the major civil rights organizations in Portland, led by the NAACP and the Urban League, showed up at the meeting to voice their disapproval. Representatives from local Jewish, Baptist, Quaker, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Catholic religious groups also joined in unison against the HAP. Close to 300 people, most of them opposed to the project, showed up at

¹ For more on the perspectives of Hirsch and McElderry, see Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Stuart McElderry, “The Problem of the Color Line: Civil Rights and Racial Ideology in Portland, 1944-1965,” (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 1998).

the hearing.² The NAACP also presented the HAP with over four hours of recorded testimony from Albina residents set against the project.³

A host of speakers arrived in person to outline their stance against the proposal. Perhaps the most salient message came from John C. Pock, a sociology professor at Reed College, in Portland. Pock warned the HAP that the “effect of your decision will be to consolidate a Negro ghetto in Portland and to legitimize it for the next 40 years – or roughly one generation.” According to Pock, new public housing projects must be used to integrate Portland’s black community. He felt the struggle to desegregate Portland’s Black Belt – the 52 percent of blacks living within a one-square mile sector with a population density six times the rest of Portland – should not be ignored by the HAP. Pock and the rest of the civil rights coalition made a bold statement by opposing the 135-unit project. The existing 664 public housing units in Portland only served an estimated three percent of eligible families. Public housing in Portland was scarce.⁴

The NAACP and the Urban League of Portland had already grown weary of the numerous attempts by the local housing authority to build new public housing units in the slums of Albina. Even before the June 24 public hearing mentioned above, the HAP had tried to push forward a proposal that would locate new public housing in the existing ghetto. On October 12, 1961, the HAP announced plans for a 58-unit Albina public housing project. The proposal quickly drew the attention of the NAACP, the Urban League, the Albina Ministerial Association, the Catholic Council on Human Relations, the Albina Neighborhood Community Council, the

² “Religious, Negro Leaders Oppose 135-Unit Albina Project at Housing Authority Hearing,” *Oregonian*, June 25, 1963, sec. 1, 1.

³ “Study Reveals Albina Facts,” *Northwest Defender* (Portland), July 18, 1963, sec. 1, 1.

⁴ John C. Pock, “A Statement Addressed to the Housing Authority of Portland,” June 24, 1963, Box 6, Folder October 1963, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Portland Branch Records, Special Collections, Knight Library, University of Oregon, Eugene; hereafter PNAACP.

Immaculate Heart Church, and the Stella Maris House (a Catholic organization). These groups issued a joint letter to Louis Ambler, a regional director with the federal Public Housing Administration, criticizing the HAP's handling of the project. Speaking out against the "high-handed manner" of the HAP, the groups claimed the local housing authority had denied their requests to meet and discuss the issues on five different occasions. Instead, they claimed the HAP went ahead obstinately without consulting the public. The letter outlined the group's main concern as the perpetuation of segregation within the existing ghetto, as well as the potential increase in the number of families packed into an already over-crowded area. The groups recommended that the project be canceled and that new public housing units be scattered outside of the black ghetto.⁵

Although the civil rights coalition remained unified in its claims against the HAP's segregationist policies, HAP executives countered with their belief that the project would clean up the area. Roy Renoud, chairman of the HAP's board of commissioners, emphasized the project would help to "upgrade the deteriorated Albina district," a line of reasoning that soon became the *modus operandi* whenever the HAP tried to justify the placement of new public housing in existing slums. Renoud also said blacks would continue to live in the neighborhood, because it was their preferred choice.⁶ In late February, 1962, the NAACP coalition once again issued a joint statement on the public housing project slated for Albina. Their argument, which had evolved since their last public statement, now included a section detailing the proximity of the proposed site to commercial property and busy streets. They saw this as a definite hazard,

⁵ E. Shelton Hill, et al., to Louis Ambler, October 16, 1961, Series I: Housing, 1949-1969, Box 12, Folder 3, Stella Maris House Collection, Oregon Historical Society, Portland; hereafter SMH.

⁶ "Home Authority Plans Low-Cost Albina Units," *Oregonian*, December 13, 1961, sec. 1, 21.

given the many children living in public housing. Once again, the group also mentioned the HAP's failure to hold public meetings in the area before the site was selected.⁷

Portland's leading African-American newspaper, the *Northwest Defender*, proved the toughest obstacle to overcome, as the NAACP coalition set out to convince the black community that HAP policies promoted segregation. Even while the NAACP coalition gained support from within the white community, the *Defender* declined to join the growing movement. Although the NAACP coalition won over the Multnomah County Democrats by February, 1962, the staff at the *Defender* remained in favor of the 58-unit Albina site until March, 1962. For the Democrats, the issue of supporting the civil rights coalition proved to be somewhat divisive. After lengthy debate, they voted in favor of opposing the project, saying it promoted segregation. Some Democrats, like Chuck Foster, who was also a member of the HAP, denounced their counterparts for supporting a resolution "that would condemn a Housing Commission that has one of the best records of any in the country." Foster questioned why blacks, specifically Urban League president E. Shelton Hill, opposed the project, saying "(Hill) seems to prefer we don't do anything in Albina for his people."⁸

From the perspective of the *Defender*, the issue proved a little more complex, as the newspaper's staff respectfully disagreed with the civil rights groups, based on the critical need for more public housing within the black community. While the *Defender* supported the HAP in this particular situation, the newspaper also printed statements from the NAACP coalition as well as the HAP, providing more balanced coverage than the *Oregonian*. When given an opportunity to express his views to the black community, Renoud labeled his opposition as being "motivated

⁷ Urban League of Portland, et al., "Statement of Fact Regarding the Public Housing Project Planned for Albina," February 27, 1962, Series I: Housing, 1949-1969, Box 12, Folder 3, SMH.

⁸ *Oregonian*, Feb. 23, 1962, sec. 1, 1.

by theoretical approaches to the problem of low-rent housing objectives.”⁹ Gradually, however, the *Defender* switched its views to align with those of the NAACP coalition. By mid-March, 1962, the *Defender* carried a considerably different viewpoint in its editorial section, under the headline, “No New Ghetto for Albina.” This new stance proved more compatible with the statements of most black leaders within Portland. In the *Defender*’s editorial, the lead is the statement “we should not let ourselves be bamboozled into accepting the Albina housing project,” followed by the question, “will Mr. Renoud and company stop at nothing to force this pill down the throats of the people of Portland?” Judging by the tone of the editorial, it becomes clear that the *Defender* staff counted themselves among those who had been bamboozled by the “candy coating” of the HAP.¹⁰

With the *Northwest Defender* now supporting the civil rights coalition, the groups continued to try and sway public opinion in their favor and against the proposed 58-unit public housing project slated for Albina. The Urban League highlighted the link between segregated housing and segregated schools, by pointing out the 48-unit Maple Mallory public housing project located only seven blocks north of the proposed site. While non-whites occupied only 15.5 percent of all public housing units in Portland, the Urban League listed Maple Mallory’s occupancy as 95.8 percent non-white, containing 41 units with black families and only two Caucasian households. Five schools within the Albina district already featured black enrollment of more than 50 percent.¹¹ Meanwhile, the 1960 census measured the black population of

⁹ Roy F. Renoud, “Policy Statement,” *Northwest Defender*, March 1, 1962, sec. 1, 2; “Awaken Albina Awaken,” *Northwest Defender*, March 1, 1962, sec. 1, 1; Urban League of Portland, et al., “Statement of Fact Regarding the Public Housing Project Planned for Albina,” *Northwest Defender*, March 1, 1962, sec. 1, 1.

¹⁰ “No New Ghetto for Albina,” *Northwest Defender*, March 14, 1962, sec. 1, 1.

¹¹ “Urban League Claims Housing Project Promotes Segregation,” *Oregonian*, May 11, 1962, sec. 1, 30.

Portland at 1.03 percent of the total population. Blacks made up only 18,000 of Portland's total population of 1.8 million, but more than 11,000 lived in the Albina district.¹²

By no means did the Urban League and other civil rights groups attempt to critique the Albina public housing project solely as a potential danger for the black community. This type of argument would have greatly limited the influence of the civil rights coalition. As the Urban League stated in a pamphlet, segregation was a "bane to the total community," and one that "increases public costs for health, welfare, police protection, etc."¹³

Eventually, with a steady stream of backlash coming from the NAACP coalition, the Portland City Council stepped in at the end of 1962, and after a study of the central Albina area, deemed it unsuitable for new public housing. With no long-term market for residential property in the area, the study carried out by the Portland Planning Commission recommended the HAP look for a different location for new public housing units.¹⁴

Both the NAACP coalition and the HAP regrouped toward the summer of 1963, with the HAP pitching a new 135-unit public housing, mentioned earlier, and the NAACP once again seeking to stir up public opinion against the HAP. Both the 58-unit public housing site and the subsequent 135-unit public housing site tested the resolve of Portland's civil rights coalition, but in the end both proposals were rejected.¹⁵ By the summer of 1963, however, civil rights leaders in Portland recognized that Renoud and the HAP remained as intractable as ever. In an interview with a local television station, Renoud defended the authority by saying, "it is not our

¹² On the population of Portland in the 1960s, see Elizabeth, McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise: A History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788-1940* (Portland, Or.: Georgian Press, 1980), 185; and McElderry, "The Problem of the Color Line," 331.

¹³ Urban League of Portland, "Housing Segregation, a Community Evil," May, 1962, Series I: Housing, 1949-1969, Box 12, Folder 3, SMH.

¹⁴ "Study Reveals Albina Facts," *Northwest Defender*, December 21, 1962, sec.1, 1.

¹⁵ "City Council Makes Swift Move to Avoid Racial Bias Charge," *Oregonian*, August 1, 1963, sec. 1, 23.

responsibility to resolve the racial question at all.” Rather, in Renoud’s mind, the HAP’s main responsibility was simply to provide low-rent housing for the city’s poor.¹⁶

As far as scattered housing sites were concerned, Renoud said the authority looked into the idea but found it to be too costly. In the TV interview, Renoud stated, “it’s real nice to get up on a soap box and say you can do it this way but the only thing we can do is to provide housing within the financial means that we have and there isn’t another darn thing we can do.”¹⁷ Running contrary to Renoud’s comments, the *Catholic Sentinel* featured an article about the public hearing held earlier, indicating testimony revealed the HAP could in fact spend more money on land for public housing, in order to build a scattered sites public housing project.¹⁸ Renoud lacked the willingness, but held the power to place new public housing outside of the black ghetto in Albina.

The HAP, like Renoud, found no shortage of excuses to throw at the civil rights coalition in order to justify HAP’s desires to place new public housing sites in Albina. As Arnold Hirsch found in researching the history of public housing in Chicago, “the real tragedy surrounding the emergence of the modern ghetto is not that it has been inherited but that it has been periodically renewed and strengthened.”¹⁹ Undoubtedly, this appeared to be what the HAP had in mind for Portland’s black community. Sagaciously, the NAACP coalition realized they would need more than just local public opinion to change the course of HAP.

A key reason why the NAACP campaign proved so effective was that it went beyond local pressure and sought to bring about change by involving the federal government. The first

¹⁶ “Unedited Transcript of Panel Discussion of PHA Practices, Roy Renoud, PHA and Richard T. Frost, Channel 2,” June 13, 1963, Series I: Housing, 1949-1969, Box 12, Folder 3, SMH.

¹⁷ “Unedited Transcript.”

¹⁸ “Give Young Negroes a Chance,” *Catholic Sentinel* (Portland), July 4, 1963, Series B: Albina, 1948-1973, Box 3, Folder 9, SMH.

¹⁹ Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 9.

target on their list, U.S. President John F. Kennedy, had endeared himself to black urban voters in his 1960 presidential campaign. By promising to fight for a federal law against housing discrimination, Kennedy raised the expectations of black leaders.²⁰ When Kennedy issued Executive Order 11063, banning racial discrimination in federally funded housing as of November 10, 1962, most saw it as a minor victory for civil rights. Historian Arnold Hirsch echoed the sentiments of many in describing the order as “a modest first correction” in the struggle for equal housing opportunities.²¹ Kennedy was, after all, still the same man who had come to Portland shortly before he was elected in 1960 and praised the HAP for integrating its public housing projects. The HAP’s 1962 annual report featured a smiling Kennedy posing for a photo, while holding a white baby. Right next to him stood Gene W. Rossman, executive director of the HAP.²² Rossman’s photo-op with Kennedy took place in a public housing apartment in the 54-unit Iris Court Complex, which at the time of Kennedy’s visit housed only three black families. Token integration was the norm in Portland’s public housing projects. The largest, Columbia Villa, featured 440 units, of which 46 housed black families and 387 housed white families. Dekum Court, the second largest with 86 units, housed four black families and 81 white families. Maple Mallory Court, containing 48 units, housed 37 black families and seven white families.²³ This was not what the NAACP coalition had strived for, but it had to have been an improvement on the situation in many southern cities, at least from Kennedy’s perspective.

²⁰ John F. Bauman, *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal: Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920-1974* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 171.

²¹ Arnold Hirsch, “Containment on the Home Front: Race and Federal Housing Policy from the New Deal to the Cold War,” *Journal of Urban History* 26 (2000): 183. SAGE, <http://juh.sagepub.com>.

²² Housing Authority of Portland, “The Public Housing Story: A Review of Portland’s Progress on the 25th Anniversary of Public Housing in America,” September 1, 1962, Series I: Housing, 1949-1969, Box 12, Folder 3, SMH.

²³ Housing Authority of Portland to Dr. Robert Bonthius, June 28, 1963, Box 6, Folder October 1963, PNAACP.

The Portland NAACP, under the leadership of its president Mayfield Webb, sought to make more of an impact the next time the HAP tried to obtain another endorsement from Kennedy. When Edith Green, a Democratic congresswoman from Oregon, announced that President Kennedy planned to visit Portland in late September of 1963, Webb and the NAACP made a stand. Kennedy's West Coast visit, scheduled to include several stops in Oregon, would see him dedicate a new high-rise public housing project for seniors in Portland on September 28, 1963.²⁴ Hyped as the first high-rise, low-rent public housing project on the Pacific Coast exclusively for seniors, Kennedy's dedication of the 180-unit project was intended to serve as another public relations coup for the HAP.²⁵ Webb had a different agenda. He pointed out the HAP's alleged failure to inform blacks that they were accepting applications for the new project, and mentioned the possibility that the NAACP might picket the HAP during Kennedy's visit. Not one of the units in Northwest Towers was to be filled by a black occupant. Webb felt that by the time blacks found out the HAP was taking applications for Northwest Towers, the HAP already had more than enough applications to fill the project. In dedicating the project, Webb believed Kennedy would be "patting the Housing Authority on the back" and in a sense "that would make them untouchables."²⁶

Webb and the NAACP on several occasions had pressed hard to influence local and federal officials to step in and overrule the HAP plans for Albina. A few months earlier, at the end of July, 1963, Webb sent an acerbic letter to Edith Green urging her to step in and stop the Albina project. Webb castigated Green for her neutral stance by saying, "I am reminded of your [report from Congress] of March-June 1963 in which you stated, 'Dante once said that the hottest

²⁴ "Kennedy Sets Oregon Visit," *Oregonian*, August 31, 1963, sec. 1, 1.

²⁵ Housing Authority of Portland, "The Public Housing Story: A Review of Portland's Progress on the 25th Anniversary of Public Housing in America," September 1, 1962, Series I: Housing, 1949-1969, Box 12, Folder 3, SMH.

²⁶ "Negro Dislike for Housing Status May Cancel Out Kennedy Visit," *Oregonian*, September 18, 1963, sec. 1, 20.

places in hell are reserved for those who remain neutral in time of crisis’.”²⁷ On a local level, NAACP political action chair Lorna Marple, a longtime NAACP member and former branch president, sent a scathing letter to Portland mayor Terry Schrunk, suggesting he would be wise to start working more cooperatively with the civil rights community. She promised Schrunk that “to join with the morally righteous in this movement, cannot be expected to hurt anyone politically at this juncture.”²⁸ The NAACP leadership had already pleaded for help, but found little response. Now, with Kennedy scheduled to visit, they adopted a more aggressive approach.

Although it was an unpopular move within the white political arena, Webb’s threatened picketing of the HAP allowed the NAACP to air its grievances on a national level. Also, by vacillating over whether or not to picket the HAP during the President’s visit, Webb and the NAACP sent local politicians scrambling to prevent a public relations disaster. Edith Green, who had organized the visit, turned irate over the actions of Webb and the NAACP. Regarding the HAP handling of Northwest Towers, Green claimed, “there is not a scrap of evidence of discrimination.” Green, on this occasion, was powerless. Under pressure, as a result of the NAACP threats to picket, HAP chairman Roy Renoud sent a telegram to Green, asking for the visit to be cancelled. The *Oregonian* called the move “a victory” for Webb and a “back-of-the-hand” to Green.²⁹ Amazed at how easily the HAP bended under the pressure of the NAACP, Portland Mayor Terry Schrunk described the HAP move as somewhat of an overreaction, saying, “if the President of the United States can be intimidated by a comparatively small group of people who have become emotionally involved in an issue, then we are in real trouble.”³⁰

²⁷ Mayfield K. Webb to Edith Green, July 27, 1963, Box 6, Folder October 1963, PNAACP.

²⁸ Lorna Marple to Terry Schrunk, August 1, 1963, Box 6, Folder August 1963, PNAACP.

²⁹ “JFK Cancels Speaking Visit in Portland,” *Oregonian*, September 20, 1963, sec. 1, 1.

³⁰ James Lattie, “Possible Cancellation of JFK Visit Stirs Dispute Over Housing Group,” *Oregonian*, September 19, 1963, sec. 1, 19.

Through the end of September, 1963 and into October, Webb and the NAACP used the Kennedy incident to keep the focus on the HAP and its policies. Federal investigators from the Housing and Home Finance Agency looked into the discrimination charges and found nothing wrong with HAP policies. According to HHFA commissioner Marie McGuire, the statistics proved little. Even though the statistics showed 97 to 99 percent white occupancy in three of the Portland's public housing projects, 92 percent white occupancy in two of the projects and 93 percent black occupancy in one project, McGuire felt they did not tell the entire story. McGuire explained that "percentages which may appear to be unsatisfactory can result even when there is full compliance with equal opportunity," and insisted that the HAP's case fell into this type of category. What McGuire and the HHFA wanted was specific evidence of discrimination.³¹ Webb came forward with Jimmie Proctor, a 58-year old black senior who filed suit against the HAP for shirking his application for Northwest Towers, but the State Civil Rights Division ruled against Proctor.³²

By bringing the federal and state government into the controversy with the HAP, the NAACP may not have won any judicial rulings, as in the case of Proctor, or even been able to prove their case of discrimination to the HHFA, but that couldn't have been Webb's main goal. Rather, he wanted to keep the HAP from gaining leverage on the NAACP coalition by receiving a public endorsement from the President. Keeping Kennedy away forced the HAP to realize that the NAACP wielded considerable political power in its own right, and that the HAP could not monopolize the media spotlight or force its views on an unwilling black coalition. A graduate of the Northwestern College of Law in Portland, Webb started his practice in 1960 and became

³¹ Marie C. McGuire to Mrs. William S. McLennan, November 19, 1963, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Box 6, Folder Executive Committee and General Membership, November 1963, PNAACP.

³² "Proctor Supports Discrimination in Northwest Towers," *Northwest Defender*, December 11-25, sec. 1, 1; William Hilliard, "Internal Controversy Threatened Oregon Civil Rights Movement in 1963," *Oregonian*, December 30, 1963, sec. 1, 16.

president of the NAACP Portland branch in 1962. He must have known it would be virtually impossible to score a legal victory in court against the HAP. In his 1959 report for the Commission on Race and Housing, Davis McEntire, a social welfare professor at UC-Berkeley, had already found that most civil rights groups and minorities earned minimal results when bringing forward accusations of subtle racism. Based on his research, McEntire found that “against this type of concealed, legal discrimination, minority individuals are virtually helpless,” largely because “they may prosecute and win an occasional law suit, but in most cases discriminatory intent cannot be proved in court.”³³

Legal issues aside, support for Webb and the NAACP continued both during and after the Kennedy incident. The Urban League, the Greater Portland Council of Churches and the Citizen’s League for Equal Opportunity backed the NAACP. Even though none of these groups had threatened to picket the HAP, they were comfortable with the NAACP stance. The council of churches issued a statement referring to the NAACP as “an alert, intelligent, responsible citizen group,” and emphasized the need to look at the situation in context and “ask why it happened and what it symbolizes.”³⁴ While many local politicians were miffed at not getting to see Kennedy, some local Democrats like Marsha Adelsheim, central committee vice chairman, drew some positives from the incident, saying “this cancellation may serve to dramatize the fact that the Northwest also has problems of segregation that need work.”³⁵ In general, the NAACP actions caused many to question Portland’s longstanding reputation as a liberal city. Was

³³ Davis McEntire, *Residence and Race* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 290.

³⁴ Greater Portland Council of Churches, “Statement Regarding Housing Controversy,” September 20, 1963, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Box 6, Folder Executive Committee and General Membership, November 1963, PNAACP.

³⁵ “JFK Cancels Speaking Visit in Portland,” *Oregonian*, September 20, 1963, sec. 1, 1.

Portland really a liberal paradise for transplanted southerners or a transplanted southern city, as some blacks in Portland would say?

By pointing out the disastrous effects of public housing and urban renewal in Chicago, the NAACP coalition in Portland strengthened their argument against HAP policies. With such a small black population in the 1960s, Portland never came close to replicating some of the country's major black ghettos. Portland's public housing policies, even if deeply rooted in segregationist ideals, could not have built up the same type of extensive black ghettos as the kind produced in cities like Chicago and Philadelphia. Yet, there existed a noticeable effort on the part of the NAACP coalition to create the idea that Portland, if all went horribly awry in public housing, could fall into the mold of Chicago or Philadelphia. During the public hearing on June 24, 1963, where most in attendance showed their hostility toward the proposed 135-unit public housing project slated for Albina, Rabbi Emmanuel Rose propagated the idea that Portland could be heading toward its own catastrophe. Representing Temple Beth Israel in Portland, the Rabbi exhorted the HAP to seize the opportunity "to catch a problem before it becomes a severe one, before it erupts into the serious proportions of Chicago and elsewhere."³⁶ Whether hyperbole or not, the Rabbi's comments alluded to the fact that Portland's public housing situation shared several similarities with what was occurring in Chicago, a major metropolis in which 30 percent of the population was black.³⁷

Perhaps the most infamous U.S. public housing project in the 1960s, the Robert Taylor Homes, were built in Chicago in the early 1960s and opened in 1962. Right in the midst of the NAACP campaign in Portland against the HAP, the Robert Taylor Homes served to illustrate the failures of public housing. Featuring 4,500 high-rise apartments, housing 27,000 residents on a

³⁶ "Religious, Negro Leaders Oppose 135-Unit Albina Project at Housing Authority Hearing," *Oregonian*, June 25, 1963, sec. 1, 10.

³⁷ Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 3.

95-acre site, the project soon became a sprawling black ghetto, and the largest public housing project in the world.³⁸ Chicago's city council first set aside land for the project beginning in the 1950s, but gradually the white community, led by the city council, rejected any proposal that would have situated the project on vacant land outside of the black ghetto. As a result, the Taylor homes were placed next to the Stateway Gardens project, which already had 1,684 units of public housing and stood as the framework of Chicago's black ghetto.³⁹

On the surface, the sheer volume of the public housing statistics in Chicago seem to dwarf those of Portland; however, the NAACP coalition astutely drew comparisons between the two situations. Although public housing in Portland only accounted for 664 units, the HAP proposals to place public housing within Albina's black ghetto proved strikingly similar to what was occurring in Chicago. Between 1955 and 1966, Chicago's city council approved 51 public housing sites, 49 of which were placed in black ghettos located in the south, west and near north side of the city.⁴⁰ In Philadelphia, the same type of pattern took form, as all public housing projects planned and built between 1956 and 1967 were situated in black ghettos or transitional (quickly dilapidating, increasingly black) neighborhoods.⁴¹

One explanation for these numbers came from historian Arnold Hirsch, who coined the phrase "making the second ghetto" in order to describe the way in politicians used public housing as a tool to reinforce the ghetto in Chicago. According to Hirsch's analysis, the first ghetto took shape during the World War I period and relied on a hostile private real estate environment and general enmity from whites toward blacks. Intimidation in the private real

³⁸ Roger Biles, "Public Housing and the Postwar Urban Renaissance, 1949-1973," in *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America*, eds. John F. Bauman, Roger Biles and Kristin M. Szylvian (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 149; Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *American Project: the Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 13-15.

³⁹ Venkatesh, *American Project*, 18; Biles, "Public Housing," 149.

⁴⁰ Biles, "Public Housing," 150.

⁴¹ Bauman, *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal*, 169.

estate environment was all that was needed to keep Chicago segregated, while government involvement proved unnecessary. With blacks migrating en masse to work in the cities during World War II, urban centers like Chicago soon found themselves unprepared for the major influx of blacks. In this case, government involvement was needed to reinforce the black ghetto as it expanded and transformed following the war. Public housing proved to be paramount in containing and reshaping the ghetto, according to Hirsch.⁴²

Portland's public housing story in the 1960s resembled what Hirsch described, but on a smaller scale, and with a key difference being the influential role of the Portland branch of the NAACP. While the Chicago NAACP publicly attacked the Chicago Housing Authority's discriminatory policies in 1953, by the late 1950s and into the early 1960s the Chicago branch had lost its political clout. According to Hirsch, the city's NAACP branch "had no regular staff, was torn by factions, and could attract but twenty or thirty people to its meetings."⁴³ This was a stark contrast from Portland's NAACP during the same period.

The civil rights movement in Chicago lacked the cohesiveness needed to stop white politicians from using public housing to reinforce the black ghetto. Like Portland, Chicago's black community welcomed new public housing but lacked the unity needed to keep it from being placed within black ghettos. One black newspaper editor described the conundrum by saying, "we think that public housing is wrong the way it's being handled...but if we come out against it hard, then they'll just not build it anywhere, and that would be worse. So what do we do? We just mumble about it."⁴⁴ Portland's civil rights coalition did more than simply mumble. Still, even with a strong movement building against the HAP, there was a danger that the HAP would simply ignore the voices of discontent. Yet, as Reed College sociologist John C. Pock

⁴² Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, and "Containment on the Home Front."

⁴³ Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 231- 248.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 252.

phrased it, “Portland has a more than reasonable opportunity to avoid making the kinds of mistakes that are almost destroying such large urban centers as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and others.” Pock delivered this message at the June 24, 1963 public hearing on the 135-unit project sited for Albina.⁴⁵ At the time, Pock undoubtedly realized that Portland already had a questionable track record, making its own share of mistakes dating back to the 1940s.

Public housing policy stemming from the World War II era not only caused the black ghetto in Albina to form, it also triggered the discontent within the black community that drove the NAACP movement forward during their 1960s campaign against public housing. The civil rights grievances against the HAP dated back to the WWII era, when the housing authority failed to come up with adequate housing for the 20-25,000 black workers who had come to work in Portland’s shipbuilding industry. On Dec. 12, 1941, the HAP was founded as an emergency wartime measure and then in 1942 made an initial attempt to address the general housing shortage.⁴⁶ To start, the HAP proposed building a 4,900-unit public housing complex to house wartime workers. At the time, statistics showed a need for 37,000 total public housing units.⁴⁷ From there, the HAP contemplated a plan to build a dorm for black shipyard workers in the Albina area. When 500 Albina residents (the area was still largely white and working class at the time) protested the idea, the HAP backed away from the plan.⁴⁸ Even when Vanport – the largest wartime public housing facility in the country – was built in the fall of 1942, black workers still faced a major housing shortage. Many of the city’s blacks moved to the Albina

⁴⁵ John C. Pock, “A Statement Addressed to the Housing Authority of Portland,” June 24, 1963, Box 6, Folder October 1963, PNAACP.

⁴⁶ Portland Bureau of Planning, *History of Portland’s African American Community, 1805 to the Present* (Portland, Or.: City of Portland, Bureau of Planning, 1993), 59-63.

⁴⁷ Carl Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth Century City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 133.

⁴⁸ Portland Bureau of Planning, *History of Portland’s African American Community*, 63-64.

district or into temporary public housing.⁴⁹ On May 30, 1948, the Vanport flood wiped out 6,000 of the project's 9,942 units, killing fifteen people and leaving 18,500 others, including 6,000 blacks, homeless.⁵⁰

The Vanport flood had great significance on the 1960s public housing campaign against the HAP, in that it paved the way for Portland's black community to become concentrated in the Albina district. The two main census tracts within the Albina district, tracts 22 and 23, underwent major transformations. Together, the two tracts gained 3,484 nonwhites and lost 2,713 whites between 1940 and 1950. This concentration of the black community came as a direct result of the private housing discrimination that became predominant following World War II and the Vanport disaster.⁵¹ Shortly after the war, in 1949, the Portland Realty Board expelled a realtor for selling property to a black man within a white district.⁵² Discrimination in private housing served as a precursor for the discrimination that wound its way into the public housing picture during the 1960s. Even in the 1960s, Portland NAACP president Mayfield Webb enlisted the help of about 20 local attorneys who volunteered to accompany black families during their search for un-segregated private housing.⁵³ Bolstered by the segregated private housing market, Portland's public housing system only needed to play a minor role in keeping blacks from being integrated. Where Chicago and Philadelphia used public housing as a major tool in promoting and enforcing segregation, Portland relied largely on the private housing industry to maintain segregation. Following the Vanport flood of 1948, the HAP lobbied Oregon's congressional delegation to land \$50 million in federal loans and grants. These grants were used to help

⁴⁹ McElderry, "The Problem of the Color Line," 100-101.

⁵⁰ McElderry, "The Problem of the Color Line," 142.

⁵¹ Portland Bureau of Planning, *History of Portland's African American Community*, 86-87.

⁵² Elizabeth McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise: a History of Blacks in Oregon, 1788-1940* (Portland, Or.: Georgian Press, 1980), 143.

⁵³ Garry P. McMurray to Mayfield K. Webb, August 9, 1963, Box 6, Folder September 1963, PNAACP.

Portland's private construction companies build new homes for flood victims.⁵⁴ The private real estate industry, as HAP officials knew, was clearly the more effective tool for enforcing the segregation that had become standard in Portland. In turn, the private real estate and home building industries used their political muscle to ensure that public housing projects were voted down both in 1950 and in 1952. Stuart McElderry described the irony of their argument by saying that private interest groups claimed that "[public housing] retarded rather than advanced integration and only encouraged the development of ghettos and slums."⁵⁵ Clearly, HAP history showed that the organization had never been committed to helping out the black community, or building any form of public housing, for that matter. Many within the civil rights coalition saw no reason to believe the HAP had suddenly taken a newfound interest in the black community beginning in the 1960s. Even with the critical need for public housing in Portland following the Vanport disaster, the HAP stalled on building public housing. The HAP's first new public housing project after World War II turned out to be Northwest Towers, the contentious senior housing complex that polarized the NAACP and the HAP.⁵⁶

Sophistry on the part of the HAP, intended to divide and weaken the NAACP coalition, triggered a great deal of animosity toward the HAP and in some cases served to embolden the opposition. After the Northwest Towers incident, the NAACP picketed Portland's city hall on September 30, 1963, asking for the removal of Roy Renoud, chairman of the HAP's board of commissioners, and Gene Rossman, the HAP's executive director. As evidence, the NAACP released a statement outlining their position. In it, the NAACP referenced "the history of the housing authority and their beliefs that certain ethnic groups desire their own projects and settlements." The NAACP was irked by the idea that the HAP was promoting the belief that

⁵⁴ McElderry, "The Problem of the Color Line," 218.

⁵⁵ McElderry, "The Problem of the Color Line," 228.

⁵⁶ McElderry, "The Problem of the Color Line," 346.

blacks in Portland during the 1960s had the freedom to move freely within the public housing market and simply chose to live in black projects. Also, the NAACP clarified its frustration with the HAP's insistence on building new public housing within the Albina ghetto. As well, the NAACP reiterated its accusations of discrimination against the HAP in the handling of the Northwest Towers application process. Part of their claim was that the HAP "moved up a Negro from low on the list to immediate occupancy" in order to cover up racial discrimination. With the Northwest Towers incident fresh in their minds, the NAACP statement also included a section saying "the housing authority misled the public in suggesting that NAACP would picket the president." From the NAACP's perspective, the picketing would have been in protest of the HAP not the President.⁵⁷

Another organization, the Citizen's League for Equal Opportunity (CLEO), joined the NAACP in attacking the HAP. CLEO also asked for Renoud to be removed from his position. Like the NAACP, they released a statement condemning the Housing Authority, questioning Renoud's ideals and his publicly stated position of being "color-blind." CLEO highlighted the fact that the HAP had no black employees and had given serious thought to the construction of "a project restricted to persons of Chinese ancestry." In relation to the two Albina public housing projects, CLEO shot down Renoud's arguments that financial constraints forced the HAP to site the two public housing projects in the Albina district. According to the statement, both the deputy commissioner of the federal Public Housing Administration, and a CLEO attorney looked into Renoud's claims and found them to be false. In addition, CLEO also alleged that Renoud refused to consider the idea of maintaining a master list of applicants for public housing. This

⁵⁷ NAACP, "The Case Against the Administration of the Housing Authority of Portland," September 30, 1963, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP Administration, 1956-1965: General Office File, Housing, Oregon, Portland, 1956-1964. Microfilm A8473 Reel 13, University of Washington.

type of master list, based on a first-come, first-served basis, would allow the HAP to require families to accept the first available vacancy. Regardless of whether it was in a traditionally black or white public housing complex, families would be forced to take the first option or risk being relegated to the bottom of the list. Renoud had shot down this idea based on federal laws. Once again, CLEO attorneys found no such law and officials within the federal housing agency pointed out that other housing authorities used master lists. Furthermore, as the CLEO statement pointed out, no other HAP projects were named for individuals yet both of the Albina proposals were to be named after the late Daisy Williams, “a much-loved Negro lady” and the wife of longtime NAACP member Edgar Williams. CLEO, like all of the other civil rights groups, took great offence at the proposed name, saying the “transparent attempt to make the otherwise objectionable proposal palatable to elements of the Negro community was an insult.”⁵⁸

The HAP’s decision to name the proposed projects after Daisy Williams was seen as a calculated maneuver by the NAACP. In their opinion, the move was aimed at dividing the city’s black leaders and in one sense it worked. Edgar Williams, a member of the NAACP since 1919, was a historic figure. He had campaigned hard for a public accommodations law ever since arriving in Portland in 1918 and when the law came into place in 1953, a tearful Williams was understandably elated.⁵⁹ A longtime, influential member of Portland’s black community and a key cog in the NAACP for many years, Edgar Williams had also been a member of the HAP since 1960. When Williams was appointed as a HAP commissioner in 1960, the NAACP leadership seemed thrilled with the idea of having a prominent black leader in such a key position.⁶⁰ Gradually, the relationship between Williams and the NAACP dissolved. Throughout

⁵⁸ Citizen’s League for Equal Opportunity, “Outline of Position Re Administration of Housing Authority of Portland,” Box 6, Folder Executive Committee and General Membership, November 1963, PNAACP.

⁵⁹ McLagan, *A Peculiar Paradise*, 96.

⁶⁰ Phil Reynolds to NAACP Housing Chairman, August 17, 1960, PNAACP.

the NAACP campaign against the HAP during the 1960s, Williams decried the NAACP and other civil rights organizations for not supporting the two Albina public housing proposals. When Williams questioned the right of a local minister to speak on behalf of the NAACP at a public hearing regarding the 135-unit Albina housing project, the NAACP asked for his resignation. Williams obliged, but vented his frustrations in an interview with the *Oregonian*, saying he felt a great deal of “petty jealousy” relating to the Albina housing project because it was to be named after his wife. Meanwhile, NAACP president Webb defended his actions, alleging Williams engaged in “an attack on a fellow board member” and “its essence was to mislead the public.”⁶¹

From the outset, the HAP had relied on a strategy intended to divide the NAACP coalition and create tension within the black community, however the NAACP stayed united. The NAACP fought back to keep the HAP from using the Edgar Williams incident to imply that the civil rights coalition was effectively divided. Williams resigned close to two months before the Northwest Towers incident took place and a dysfunctional, disjointed NAACP could not have organized such an effective protest against the HAP. Perhaps Williams’ resignation served as a changing of the guard. Although Williams saw any form of new public housing as a positive, NAACP leaders like Webb carried much greater expectations. As Webb stated in a speech before the Portland City Club a few days after Williams stepped down, the NAACP was becoming impatient and no longer willing to accept “tokenism” from the HAP or any other organization.⁶²

⁶¹ “NAAACP Unit Loses Vet,” *Oregonian*, August 3, 1963, sec. 1, 1.

⁶² “NAACP Leaders Asks Removal of Portland Housing Officials and Fast School Study,” *Oregonian*, August 10, 1963, sec. 2, 1.

In general, the HAP's deceptiveness agitated the NAACP coalition but never did it cause the movement to fall apart or subside. Perhaps the greatest example of this deceptiveness came from the HAP's Roy Renoud, in the form of his written proposal to the Greater Portland Council of Churches. The proposal, sent by Renoud after the public hearing on June 24, 1963, finally acknowledged the overwhelming opposition from the black community toward the proposed 135-unit Albina project. Renoud's way of compromising involved sending the proposal to the council of churches asking the organization to join the HAP in forming a race relations committee on public housing. Gene Rossman, the HAP's executive director referred to the proposal as the beginning of an effort in which "Portland could well establish a pattern which would receive National recognition in the field of racial relations." In one sense, Renoud and the HAP were making a promising gesture. In another, the HAP's proposal was a token gesture.

Within the proposal, Renoud referred to Portland's civil rights leaders as the "alleged spokesmen for local minority groups." He thanked those who were "genuinely interested in assisting... in solving the problems of racial integration," and expressed disdain for the "the injection of high-sounding theories and panaceas that have no practical application to our problems." Toward the end of the proposal, Renoud stated his objection to dealing with "unrealistic demands from groups who seek to force their views through threats of court action, picketing, and violence."⁶³ In theory, Renoud's proposal looked promising, but the intent of the proposal, which was addressed only to the council of churches and neither the NAACP nor the Urban League, was intended to dilute the effect of the two main civil rights organizations in Portland. Within a few days, the council of churches responded with a letter praising the HAP for making taking such a "positive step forward." Beyond that, the letter defended the NAACP

⁶³ Housing Authority of Portland to Dr. Robert Bonthius, June 28, 1963, Box 6, Folder Executive Committee and General Membership, November 1963, PNAACP.

coalition by saying “these are not alleged but real leaders of the best interests of the local minority groups” who should be “praised, not criticized, for their dedicated efforts.” Even in spite of Renoud’s best efforts, the civil rights community remained united. The council of churches also questioned why Renoud chose to reference the threat of violence in his letter, given that members of the council of churches did not recall “any groups that had threatened violence.”⁶⁴

Undoubtedly, the NAACP adopted a far more militant stance than any other civil rights organizations during their 1960s struggle against the HAP, yet any idea of the Portland NAACP becoming violent was simply a product of HAP propaganda. By implying that the NAACP had become a militant, potentially violent organization, the HAP sought to turn many of Portland’s blacks against the civil rights organization. At various times this strategy worked, but only within a small segment of the black community. For example, shortly after the NAACP picketed city hall, demanding the removal of Renoud and Rossman, a group of blacks from Albina offered their apologies to mayor Terry Schrunk. The *Oregonian* story detailing the incident quoted Vivian Barnett, president of the Albina Taxpayers Association as saying, “Negroes don’t picket” and accusing the NAACP of creating tension between blacks and whites.⁶⁵ Barnett had already taken on the role of spokesperson for a small group of Albina residents who previously criticized the NAACP plans to picket the HAP at Northwest Towers. She told the *Oregonian*, “I don’t see why somebody doesn’t make Webb and the NAACP prove their charges.”⁶⁶ As for her credibility as a spokesperson, Barnett was just one of a group of black realtors from the Albina area who stood to gain from the perpetuation of the district’s ghetto. When the Albina Real

⁶⁴ William B. Cate to Roy F. Renoud, July 2, 1963, Box 6, Folder Executive Committee and General Membership, November 1963, PNAACP.

⁶⁵ “Mayor Schrunk Gets Apology from Negroes,” *Oregonian*, October 8, 1963, sec. 1, 1.

⁶⁶ James Lattie, “Possible Cancellation of JFK Visit Stirs Dispute Over Housing Group,” *Oregonian*, September 19, 1963, sec. 1, 19.

Estate Brokers Association (a group of black realtors) went on record against the NAACP plans to picket the HAP during Kennedy's visit, NAACP president Webb responded by saying "this group, like any other, has the right to an opinion, but after all, these are realtors you know, and they have a stake."⁶⁷ For some reason, however, the *Oregonian* consistently gave credence to HAP claims.

Stuart McElderry, the only historian to study Portland's public housing situation during the 1960s in any great detail, relied heavily on the *Oregonian* as a source. He argued that Portland's public housing conflicts "introduced a period of crisis for the city's civil rights coalition." He believed the civil rights movement ended up torn by the struggle over public housing. McElderry conceded only "at best half-victories" for the civil rights movement in the matters of the Albina projects and the Northwest Towers incident. McElderry asserted that the "coalition's moderate members objected to the NAACP's militant tactics."⁶⁸ Although the point is certainly debatable, I question which sources he used in order to formulate his opinion. He used the *Oregonian* extensively to back up his thoughts on public housing, instead of balancing the newspaper's take with those of the civil rights coalition, or the *Northwest Defender*. At one point, he used a story from the *Oregonian* as a critical piece of evidence in suggesting the public housing controversies served to derail Portland's civil rights movement. The *Oregonian*'s story, titled "Internal Controversy Threatened Oregon Civil Rights Movement in 1963," failed to even quote NAACP president Mayfield Webb and glossed over the many effective actions undertaken by civil rights leaders.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ "James Lattie, "Negro Units Regroup After Cancellation," *Oregonian*, September 20, 1963, sec. 1, 30.

⁶⁸ Stuart McElderry, "The Problem of the Color Line," 351.

⁶⁹ McElderry, "The Problem of the Color Line," 351; William Hilliard, "Internal Controversy Threatened Oregon Civil Rights Movement in 1963," December 30, 1963, sec. 1, 16.

I find McElderry too often depended on the perspective of the *Oregonian*, which served as somewhat of a mouthpiece for the HAP during the public housing controversy.⁷⁰ While McElderry felt the civil rights coalition “effectively altered the HAP’s policies and made more Portlanders aware of residential segregation in public housing,” he felt “conditions for poor blacks in the Albina district remained unchanged.”⁷¹ This final point rang true, but addressed a problem far beyond the scope of the NAACP coalition. While effective in keeping the HAP from reinforcing Portland’s black ghetto through the use of public housing, the NAACP coalition operated within a segregated system. The civil rights coalition in Portland, for all its strengths, did not draft neighborhood plans or determine where new public housing should be placed. Organizations like the NAACP simply opposed locating new public housing in black ghettos and suggested alternate locations. Clearly, the NAACP coalition recognized that the HAP, based on its history, was never all that determined to build public housing in Portland. The HAP, embroiled in controversy ever since its inception in 1941, was an organization based more on ideas than actions. The failure of the HAP to provide adequate, affordable housing for low-income Portlanders fit well into the national picture, in which a well-meaning social welfare program missed the mark. While President Richard Nixon banned any further construction of federally subsidized public housing in 1974, public housing was already in its last throes by the mid 1960s.⁷² Many cities were eventually forced to tear down massive public housing complexes, such as the Robert Taylor Homes, but in Portland public housing made but a minor dent.

In order to assess the efficacy of the NAACP and other civil rights organizations, it is important to clarify the situation in Portland during the 1960s. Neither Mayfield Webb nor any

⁷⁰ “Albina Project O.K.,” *Oregonian*, February 24, 1962, sec. 1, 10.

⁷¹ McElderry, “The Problem of the Color Line,” 351.

⁷² Bauman, *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal*, xi.

other black leader possessed the power to transform the HAP or the racial ideology of Portlanders. Rather, their methods involved creating a loud, unified voice and stirring up public opinion against the HAP's segregationist policies. The NAACP coalition remained united throughout the 1960s and convinced many Portlanders that the HAP promoted segregation in public housing. In turn, the HAP was forced to listen, albeit begrudgingly, to the input of Portland's black community on the issue of public housing and work toward de-segregating its existing public housing structures.⁷³ No debilitated, disconnected organization could have accomplished that.

⁷³ Gene Rossman to Joint HAP-Council of Churches Committee, August 6, 1964, Box 13, Folder 1, SMH. In the summer of 1963, the HAP formed a joint committee with the Greater Portland Council of Churches to address the complaints regarding the HAP's segregationist policies. The NAACP and the Urban League eventually joined the committee. This letter, written in 1964, features a report from Gene Rossman, the executive director of the HAP, outlining the progress made in the joint committee's first year of operation. Black occupancy within HAP units rose from 103 to 129 units and at Maple-Mallory, the predominantly black project, six new white tenants had moved in; Gene Rossman to Members of the Joint Committee of the Greater Portland Council of Churches – HAP, Box 13, Folder 1, SMH. In 1966, Rossman and the HAP reported an increase in the black occupancy of HAP units, from 13 to 17 percent, over the last two years.

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